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By Daniel H. Heinke and Jan Raudszus

In August 2014, Philip Bergner from the city of Dinslaken in North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany, died when he drove a vehicle packed with explosives into a Kurdish military post in Iraq, reportedly killing at least 20 people. He was one of several German suicide attackers fighting for the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

Numerous German Muslims have traveled to Syria since the war broke out in 2011, many in order to fight. Authorities estimate the current number to be around 600. This is not the highest per capita number in Europe, but in absolute terms it is a considerable force. According to Hans-Georg Maaßen, head of Germany’s federal domestic intelligence service, 60 people from Germany have been killed in Syria and Iraq to date. Around 180 have returned.

This article assesses what is currently known about the German foreign fighter contingent in Syria and Iraq, who they are, and in what propaganda they are involved. It will also outline the measures German authorities have taken to counter the threat posed by these German fighters.

A Long Line of German Foreign Fighters

Germans and foreigners living in Germany have participated as foreign fighters in many conflicts in the Muslim world. They fought in Afghanistan, partook in significant numbers in the civil war in Bosnia, and in smaller numbers in Chechnya. There is a personal continuity from these earlier wars. Members of the so-called Multicultural House (MKH), a community in Neu-Ulm in southern Germany, were central to recruitment and logistics for Bosnia and Chechnya. One of them, Reda Seyam, earned notoriety at that time and remained loyal to the cause even when he moved to Berlin years later. He is said to have subsequently recruited and trafficked fighters to Syria. He reportedly joined ISIL last year, serving as a minister of education first in Mosul and later in the province of Nineveh. Seyam was reportedly killed in an airstrike in Iraq in December 2014.

The MKH was not the only source of recruits for the global jihad. The al-Quds (later: Taiba) Mosque in Hamburg was the notorious point of departure for the 9/11 attackers. It continued to send potential fighters abroad in more recent years. In 2009 a group of people who had met at the mosque left for Pakistan and those who actually arrived joined al-Qa’ida. In 2010 one of them was arrested by U.S. military forces and held in Afghanistan. During interrogations he confessed to a supposed “Europlot” directed against Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Subsequently, these countries heightened their security. Several members of this group were sentenced on charges of membership in a terrorist organization when they returned.

There was also a low-level stream of German foreign fighters to other countries, including Yemen and Somalia. However, the war in Syria provided a whole new theater of conflict, which has attracted radicalized Muslims from Germany on a scale previously unseen.

German Foreign Fighters in Syria

The number of Germans immigrating to Syria has risen massively over the past two years. Islamists have tried to recruit German-speaking Muslims in the past, but now their efforts have grown in both quality and quantity. This is based at least in part on the activities of former members of the now-banned Salafi-jihadi organization Millatu Ibrahim (Abrahams Religion), which formed the nucleus of German foreign fighter activists in Syria.

Millatu Ibrahim was founded in November 2011 by Austrian citizen Mohamed Mahmoud (alias Abu Usama al-Gharib) and Denis Cuspert (alias Abu Talha al-Almani). Mahmoud is a former member of the German section of the Global Islamic Media Front (GIMF), which distributes al-Qa’ida propaganda. For his GIMF activities Mahmoud was convicted and imprisoned in 2007 and released in 2011. Before he joined and became a figurehead in the German jihadi movement, Cuspert left behind a music career as a rapper performing under the name Deso Dogg. He made contact with Reda Seyam and turned from hip-hop to neasheeds praising Usama bin Ladin and denouncing “infidels.” The group’s name was taken from the book Millatu Ibrabim by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, underscoring the group’s initial allegiance to al-Maqdisi’s thinking. The group organized German jihadis but also served to connect them to the European scene.
Germany’s Federal Ministry of the Interior banned Millatu Ibrahim in May 2012 for its involvement in riots protesting the publication of Mohammed caricatures in media outlets. Mahmoud and Cuspert subsequently left Germany. In March 2014 Mahmoud was arrested in Turkey, most probably on his way to Syria. Cuspert made it to Syria where he apparently made contact with the organization Junud al-Sham (Soldiers of Syria). In April 2014 he announced his allegiance to ISIL. He has become an important linchpin of propaganda activities, starring in several online videos and rumored to be a leading protagonist of these efforts.

After being injured in an airstrike, Cuspert appeared in an hour-long interview that provided significant insight into his thinking. He perceives death as a martyr as the highest goal for Muslims and calls upon Muslims to join him in Syria and take their families with them: “What shall a family do alone in the land of kuffar and you are alone in the Land of honor? I advise you: If you emigrate take your family with you.”

Cuspert then addresses several questions Muslims in the West may have when contemplating supporting ISIL. He describes life in Syria as comfortable and points out that there is no necessity to fight but one may support ISIL in other ways: “Every grown man with a healthy mind is able to leave. Some might stay behind for religious teaching and missionary work (dawa).”

Cuspert postulates that jihad is an obligation and calls it the peak of Islam: “There will be jihad until the day of judgment. Because as long as there is fitna on this world and people who are fighting Islam and not fearing Allah and praying only to him, there will be jihad.”

He concludes that because jihad is an obligation, it is unnecessary to know the Arabic language or a lot about the religion in order to join the fight, thus undermining some of the reasons potentially voiced by people reluctant to support the jihad actively.

Many people formerly close to Millatu Ibrahim have likely joined ISIL. In April 2014 a video appeared online that showed Cuspert reciting a nasheed, accompanied by 12 masked and armed German-speaking men singing the chorus. He has also appeared in a video posing with mutilated bodies of enemy fighters. The Washington D.C.-based Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) assesses Cuspert as an integral part of the ISIL propaganda effort through its media service al-Hayat. The media outlet has published other German language material, including a nasheed by another German and a video of a Germanfighter visiting a hospital in which he urges people to join him in Syria. In addition, the ISIL media outlets al-Ghurab and al-Hayat have also produced some of their publications in German, including the first issue of the ISIL magazine Dabiq. This obviously indicates that German speakers are involved in some capacity.

Most German jihadists in Syria have JOINED ISIS, which is of little surprise since the most prominent German foreign fighters have done so. Because those who actually leave Germany are the most radicalized, ISIL is the logical choice, especially since it already has many German foreign fighters in its ranks. According to a media report in the summer of 2014, the Germans in Syria have created their own brigade within ISIL.

Who Are the Jihadists?
We know quite a bit about the demographics of Germans who have traveled to Syria. The current total estimated number of people who have traveled is 600. Of these, security authorities have collected and analyzed data on 378 cases, and produced a study summarizing their analysis. Although this data is patchy and not comprehensive in some cases, it is an interesting approximation. While the results are not necessarily surprising, they provide an empirical confirmation of anecdotal reports.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the travelers are men (89 percent). The average age is 26.5 years and about two-thirds are younger than 26 years. Nearly two-thirds of the travelers were born and raised in Germany. About half of them are married, and 104 have children. Women who travel to Syria are on average three years younger than their male counterparts and are also more likely to be converts. There is evidence that some families have taken their children with them to Syria.

Information about educational level is

21 Said, p.144.
22 German group of fighters from ISIS together with Abu Talha al-Almani are singing a song for Angela Merkel [Eng. subs]: http://www.livelake.com/view/fi/dbc_1397923701
23 16- Brutal Beheading of a Member of the al-Shaitat Tribe with Translation: http://www.livelake.com/view/fi/608_141524967
26 German Visiting The Injured: https://ia902503.us.archive.org/24/items/GermanBrotherVisitingTheInjured/German_brother_visiting_the_injured.mp4
29 Presentation in Bonn, Claudia Dantschke, Salafism expert, July 2014.
30 Said, p.145.
32 “Analyse der den deutschen Sicherheitsbehörden vorliegenden Informationen über die Radikalisierungsschütergründe und –verläufe der Personen, die aus islamistischen Motiven aus Deutschland in Richtung Syrien ausgereist sind” (Analysis by German security authorities of current information on background and radicalization processes of those persons who have left Germany to Syria out of Islamist motivation), December 12, 2014, p.5.
33 Ibid., pp.8-11.
34 Ibid., p.25.
available in less than half of the cases, but of the data available, the study notes that the educational level is below that of the average population. Out of 378 persons, 249 had committed criminal acts before they left the country. Before they turned to Islamism the majority of the offenses were violent acts and offenses against property. During their radicalization, these offenders would commit more so-called politically motivated offenses (i.e., criminal acts directed against political or ideological opponents or constituting unlawful support of a political or ideological organization).

Ultimately, while the demographic data in this study are useful and interesting, the diversity across the categories confirms the findings already established in other studies that analyze Islamist homegrown terrorists in the Western world: There is no reliable socio-demographic profile of jihadists.

While converts gain a lot of media attention and apparently are used by the jihadist groups in Syria for propaganda targeting new, potential German-speaking recruits, they only comprise 18 percent of jihadist travelers to Syria. Importantly, travelers were almost exclusively followers of the Salafist brand of Islam.

The study also provides additional insight into the radicalization process. Of the individuals assessed, 72 percent had some connection to the Salafist scene from the beginning of the radicalization process. The internet as a sole impetus of radicalization was present in only 13 cases. This data indicate that social contacts are a major factor when it comes to the path of radicalization. The percentage of people for whom offline social contacts played no role fell to 3 percent. The study concludes that the “self-radicalization by internet” hypothesis is undermined by the results. In fact, people who were influenced by the internet were more likely to propagate Salafism publically or were noticed by security services.

The study also contains information on the duration of the radicalization process for 128 persons. Less than half (42 percent) radicalized within 12 months. In only 12 cases do we see three months or fewer between radicalization and traveling to Syria. However, while the majority of cases exceeded 12 months, the average has fallen from 3.3 years to 1.2 years since the war in Syria started. The percentage of those who have been radicalized within a year prior to their leaving has risen from 25 to 50 percent. The internet had no apparent influence on the speed of the radicalization process.

In 196 cases the motivation to travel to Syria was apparently jihadist, with 42 openly stating that they wanted to fight. About half of the 120 people who have returned to Germany are still active in the extremist scene.

Government Measures Against Prospective and Returned Fighters

In the face of the growing number of German residents who have traveled to Syria, the government has taken measures to address the problem. Authorities pursue a three-pronged approach.

The first sphere of activity comprises criminal investigations, which are conducted when individuals prepare for travel to Syria or Iraq; attempt to recruit fighters or conduct other forms of support for ISIL or another Islamist organization; or actually become involved in such an organization’s activities. All three situations are actionable under German criminal law. Several investigations have been launched by the Federal Prosecutor General and the states’ public prosecution departments, depending on crime and jurisdiction. One 20-year-old fighter who returned to Germany was recently sentenced to three years and nine months of imprisonment under juvenile law after having confessed to participation in combat for ISIL.

The second approach concerns measures under administrative law. These are mostly directed against attempts to leave the country in order to join ISIL or other Islamist organizations, and include provisions such as the withdrawal of passports and other identification documents and the prohibition of leaving the country. Administrative measures also include the obligation to report to a specific police station at regular intervals. Though not watertight, these measures have played an important role in reducing the number of militant Islamists traveling to the Middle East.

A particularly relevant instrument in this context is the possibility of banning organizations that the authorities consider a threat to public security. In early December 2014, the Bremen state authorities outlawed a Salafist group and closed its attached mosque. This group was the first identified as playing a significant role in facilitating recruitment for ISIL in Germany. Through administrative measures like these, authorities believe it is possible to counter the establishment of radicalization nodes, thus hampering attempts to influence more people. Additionally, the police are prepared to assess the possible threat posed by returned fighters—namely, by monitoring them, if necessary, in cases with insufficient evidence to achieve a criminal conviction. Though some returned fighters may be disillusioned by their experience in the conflict area, others—desensitized by and indoctrinated to accept and support ISIL’s brutal tactics, and still clinging to this ideology—pose a serious menace to the public.

Equally important, though, is the attempt to counter radicalization efforts before they produce a significant impact. The German ministers of the interior both on the national and state levels recently agreed to a coordinated set of prevention and intervention measures directed

36 Ibid., pp.11-13.
39 Ibid., p. 22
40 Ibid., pp.17-18, 27.
41 Ibid., p. 22.
42 Ibid., pp.18-19.
43 Ibid., p.20.
45 Jan Raudszus, “Innensenator verbietet salafistischen Verein,” Weser-Kurier, December 6, 2014, p. 1. (Disclaimer: Author Heinke was in charge of the respective investigation.)
against Islamist violent extremism.¹ With local concepts adjusted to their respective community requirements and coordinated by information centers at the state level, the approach aims to provide information to prevent radicalization, and to utilize proactive social work to take care of people already influenced by jihadist ideology. The goal of this type of approach is to encourage and assist non-governmental organizations in providing low-threshold access to information on Islam in a Western society, thus reducing the influence of jihadist sites with regard to this topic. Several regional non-governmental organizations already provide information and support to families in the attempt to intervene in radicalization processes or even facilitate demobilization of German fighters in Syria, a concept that recently has started spreading internationally.² Additional non-governmental, but government-funded organizations in Germany have been founded lately, and more will likely follow.

These three approaches are complemented by the ongoing monitoring of jihadists by the domestic intelligence services and the police intelligence divisions on the national and state levels.

Conclusion
Germany is a considerable source of Islamist foreign fighters who participate in the war in Syria and Iraq. Most have sworn allegiance to ISIL. They present a clear and present threat to Western societies and, despite the efforts by authorities in Germany, will likely continue to do so for years to come.

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